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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the failure of many curriculum development projects in recent years it is important not to reject continued support for curriculum development; rather, deeper probing into the presuppositions and practical orientations that have until now dominated such development is needed. Curriculum design in which scope, content, and sequence are predetermined often limits the independent opportunities of teachers. A new kind of scrutiny of generic curricula is needed. Teachers will be most benefited not by highly specific and detailed curricula, but rather by being given help in developing wider repertoires, alternative ways of adapting the generic curriculum to the individual profiles of children's strengths and motivation. Curriculum research should set a task in which teachers and subject matter specialists collaborate as equals to remap the elementary domains of subject matter in such a way as to make them maximally accessible. (DS)

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CURRICULUM RESEARCH -- A POLICY PROPOSAL

David Hawkins

Some major national efforts in curriculum development were begun in the 1960s. The product of these efforts have by now been widely disseminated and tested. There appears to be some professional consensus that the results, measured in terms of redirection and enhancement of children's learning, are meager. There is also a widespread recognition that these efforts in curriculum development have had relatively little influence in modifying the total effective school environment in which children live for some of the peak hours of their lives. The new curricula are either adapted to the style and tempo of a pre-existent school environment or, after a time, they are rejected as an alien graft. One may argue that the source of failure has lain elsewhere than in the new curricula themselves; some of the, at least, might have proved excellent in a radically altered context.

Nevertheless, a reaction is inevitable, in which once more our continuing and deepening educational failures are blamed on the latest serious effort to remedy them.

I believe that in reviewing and reformulating educational policy in light of the experience reviewed above, it is profoundly important <u>not</u> to reject continued support for curriculum development, but instead to probe more deeply into the presuppositions and practical orientations which have until now dominated such development.

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I wish to urge a special emphasis in the present re-examination, namely, to define curriculum development in a new way. In the proposed redefinition, curriculum development will be seen as one component of a larger undertaking, an undertaking which does seek to modify school environments to enhance children's learning. One of the more thoughtful present-day reactions against the previous period of curriculum development is the renewed concern about preservice and in-service education of teachers, a concern which goes far beyond the summer institutes and traveling workshops of the previous period. (One author has dramatized this reaction with a clever title, " Curriculum-Proof Teachers.[1]) In this reaction, however long overdue and however welcome, there is a serious danger that the existing array of curriculum materials, whatever it may be, will again be taken as something given, to be proved effective if only teachers understand it better.

There is, of course, a sense in which teachers must accept the curriculum as given. But there is another sense in which this truism can hide what I believe to be just the problem most worthy of examination at present, most critical in avoiding another wave of ineffective reform.

Let me distinguish three meanings or levels of "curriculum". The first is the <u>generic</u> curriculum, special bodies of knowledge and repertoires of skill which society, the local community, the schools and their teachers, are committed to setting before children and helping them master. The second level is the <u>specific</u> curriculum, a relatively detailed organization of subject matter, developed in some linear order

to fit the time-track of schooling. The third level of "curriculum" is the actual life of a class, specific, individual children living from day to day under the guidance of an individual teacher. I shall call this level simply the life.

The generic curriculum is externally, though not always inflexibly, set by the community and the schools. It is, indeed, given. The life is governed by the teacher, the principal adult who shares in it daily. The specific curriculum is the link, the bridge by which the generic curriculum is to be made effective in the life. The key problem alluded to above concerns the way in which the specific curriculum is conceived and designed, and the kinds of adult knowledge, experience, and talent which the design requires. The specific curriculum is subject to two major systems of constraint. The first derives from the nature of the bodies of knowledge and repertoires of skill in terms of which the generic curriculum is defined. The second derives from the particular developmental characteristics of those individual children whose life in school the curriculum is supposed to inform; children also are given. What is to be achieved is a successful matching of the two along the way, a constantly changing dynamical interaction.

I shall argue that the second of these constraints is often grossly neglected, and that as a result the first becomes misunderstood and distorted.

The traditional images of the organized specific curriculum are the textbook and the timetable it implies. One strong tendency in recent

years has been to spell things out in detail even greater than that in the old textbooks; to develop a sequence of even bulkier "packages" replete with workbooks and tests. The ghost teacher who inhabits every textbook acquires more substance; the actual teacher is more often assumed to be absent. Instruction in this mode is sometimes called individualized because every child has his own identical copy of the "package".

What happens as a result of this kind of curriculum development, in which scope, content, and sequence are predetermined, is that the independent opportunities and demands of the life are ignored and the match of child curriculum is not achieved. There is insufficient opportunity for teachers to reorganize or alter the generic curriculum adapting it to the needs, talents, and enthusiasms of individual children; there is strong encouragement for teachers to rely on the prepackaged wisdom of others and to be only its administrators. Good teachers can to some extent meet this overconstraint by various defensive strategies, which is itself a sad commentary.

In denying the value of prepackaged wisdom I do not wish to deny the need for strong professional help. In all their work teachers need such help; among all the professions they receive the least. (I venture this statement without documentary support, and think it would be a minor and useful piece of research to obtain comparative figures for law, medicine, dentistry, etc.) By professional help I mean everything which is designed to contribute to in-service professional development. The kind of help which takes the form of predesigned ,

detailed, specific curricula does not primarily contribute to professional growth in the art of teaching, but is rather a substitute for it; it presupposed that teachers are more like interchangeable tenants of lower ranking civil service jobs than they are professionals.

Teachers have been subjected to this kind of "help" for a very long time. In spite of all efforts here and there to change this situation -- not least by insightful and determined teachers -- conditions have slowly worsened over the past few decades, as the schools have been subject to increasing social pressures. The remedy, which I see as a long and difficult but unavoidable task, has two aspects which I have already implicitly defined. One is a new kind of scrutiny and analysis of generic curricula. The other looks toward the role of teachers in fruitfully and inventively shaping the life in their classrooms. It seeks to define and provide the kinds of professional help which will give curricular support to teachers' art rather than trying to bypass it.

At the very least, teachers should be given professional support in adapting all predesigned specific curricula; at the most, they should be helped to develop their own specific curricula. What kinds of help or collaboration does this imply? First, it implies that specific curricula for specific groups of children should not be laid out in advance of the sort of in-school planning which accomodates constant decision-making along the way -- as teachers monitor the life and see possible new avenues of development emerge. Arguements which

lead in this direction are often seen as an abandonment of rationality. Critics confuse the generic with the specific curriculum, the subject matter with the textbook about it. And, indeed, rationality can be lost if teachers, in reacting against narrow curricula, opt for a benignly custodial and ultimately anarchistic view of their role in education. This easy reaction against tight-laced classrooms, in which most children fail to learn, is likely to produce loose-laced classrooms in which children also fail to learn, fail to be challenged, fail to become personally involved with the subject matter which underlies the textbook. The educational anarchists are a Minority, I think, but they can fuel reactions against serious efforts at change.

Many recent efforts in curriculum development not only have tended not to narrow the range of teachers' significant choice in exercising their art, and to discourage their professional growth, but also have been based on a false conception of the systems of knowledge which they seek to articulate. I cannot spell this out here, but can only suggest it as a basic research task. Roughly speaking my argument is as follows: the bodies of knowledge which define the generic curriculum are, in fact, <u>bodies</u>, bodies of interconnected conceptions and beliefs related to and living in a wider context of practical experience. A human being who has adequately assimilated such a body of knowledge can move about in it easily and can find in it guidance in practical affairs or in facing novelties, helping open them for investigation. The usual conception of a specific curriculum is of a once-for-all "unpacking" of this body of knowledge (for example, elementary arithmetic) into a

single sequenced array of specific topics. Mastery of each topic is a small step preparing for the next, and, when a child has "gone through" the sequence, then the child is supposed to have learned what the generic curriculum requires.

Such sequenced arrays misrepresent the nature of any generic curriculum. To be important, a body of knowledge and system of skills must have many sorts of connections with outside experience, including the antecedant and concurrent experience of children. Every such connection is potentially a point of entry into the curriculum for one or more children. The more such points of entry a teacher is prepared to recognize and exploit, the greater is the "target area" for serious learning at every stage. Thus, to optimize learning paths for each child is also to optimize average learning rates in relation to the whole body of knowledge in question.

The conclusion to which this line of argument points is that teachers will be most helped not by being given highly detailed specific curricula to follow but rather by being given help in developing wider repertoires, alternative ways of adapting the generic curriculum to the individual profiles of children's strengths and motivation. This kind of repertoire implies a certain imaginative ease with and mastery of subject matter -- elementary subject matter -- which in fact few teachers have been given the opportunity or encouragement to acquire either pre-service or in-service.

The first aim of curriculum research should, then, be to set a task in which teachers and subject matter specialists -- skillful and imaginative ones, both -- collaborate as equals; not to produce specific curricula in the old, restrictive pattern, but to remap the elementary domains of subject matter in such a way as to make these maximally accessible; accessible in the first place to teachers themselves, whose own educations have typically been limited by the standard academic introductory courses which are the basis of their existing knowledge; and in the second place to groups of children. It has been our experience that the excitement of a deeper and more leisurely investigation of elementary subject matter can give teachres new eyes for observing their children's own talents and for providing well the sustenance which such observation will suggest.

Before continuing to the second aim of curriculum research, I must say something about the term "elementary". The word has a condescending connotation in ordinary usage; elementary subject matter is wrongly conceived as easy, simple. On the contrary, the elements of any disciplined way of thought are deep -- and too often taken for granted by unreflective professionals, while they are almost unapproachable by outsiders not yet tuned to the discipline. It should be a term of highest praise to say that a teacher is an elementary mathematician, and elementary geographer or biologist, a critic of the elements of children's literature and writing -- an elementary teacher!

The second aim of curriculum research grows out of the first; as subject matter specialists have the opportunity to observe their disciplines being translated as they work with successful teachers, their own professional understanding is stimulated and extended. There is, for example, a wide range of quite elementary mathematics, evolved from Greek times to the present, which most contemporary mathematicians are ignorant of but can relearn in the context I suggest. Their education has bypassed all this as too "elementary" to be valuable. Yet a teacher who, with help, develops an amateur interest in such matters can find endless opportunities to trap the interest and imagination of children, and to extend their insight and skill. A teacher who can elicit serious "elementary" science or art or writing from children is not thereby an Einstein or Picasso or Tolstoy but yet is one of their company.

I do not know how the results of such joint investigations can best be communicated to others. That is yet another matter for serious investigation. It is clearly inconsistant with the whole nature and aim of such work that it should issue in new specific curricula, packaged and delivered at the school door. The basic aim of such work must be to contribute to the education and artistry of teachers and to create an environment for teachers which supports them adequately. in designing and redesigning their own specific curricula, shaped to the needs and talents of the children they work with. Such help can take many forms. Books, journals, film are almost certainly insufficient by themselves, but can give strong support to those involved in in-service

education, to teachers' centers, and to the redirection of the liberal arts college pre-service education as well, an education now woefully inadequate. Its "elementary" survey courses, aimed at reaching "higher" levels rapidly, are often a paradigm of what our teachers do not need, and of what frustrates their desire to master the elements.

In this essay I have not defined a research program. I hope I have suggested for discussion some policy criteria. The policies I have set forth will not eventuate in panaceas. Yet I believe that it can be argued that partial successes coming from a serious reexamination of the generic curricula along the lines suggested can lead to a greater net gain, in the short and in the middling time scale, than can either an abandonment of research in curriculum development or another round of efforts which repeat the failures of the past.

In a short, dogmatic essay I have necessarily overgeneralized. Some of the earlier (and current) efforts do work in directions I would desire. But even those making these efforts are under pressure to produce "results" in the patterns of the old-style specific curricula. We can and must afford a fundamental kind of curricular research; one which seriously re-examines the generic curricula, the curricular disciplines, is the most needed.[2]

Reference

1. R.N. Bush, in Improving In-Service Education, Louis J. Rubin, Boston, 1971, pp 37-70.

2. I have argued and tried to illustrate the nature of this research and its collaborative character, in several places and for several levels. I enclose some recent reprints and would also refer to essays in my book The Informed Vision, Agathon, New York, 1974.